



The UK's Leading Cancer Information Service

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Cancer
InformationClinical
TrialsCancer
QsHealth
ProfessionalsResources
and SupportSupport
UsContact
UsSearch
SiteSpecific
CancersCancer
TreatmentsLiving
with CancerAlphabetical
ListPrinted
PublicationsMake a
donation

Introduction

What is secondary
bone cancer

The bones

What are the causes?

What are the
symptoms?

How it is diagnosed

Types of treatment
used

Radiotherapy

Hormonal therapy

Chemotherapy

Surgery

Treating weakened
bones

Treating pain

Bisphosphonates

Treating
hypercalcaemia

Follow up

Research - clinical
trials

Your feelings

Talking to children

If you are a friend or
relative

What you can do

Who can help

CancerBACUP's
servicesOther useful
organisations

Helpful books

References

Understanding secondary cancer in the bone

From the CancerBACUP booklet series

Related CancerQs

Questions and
answers on
secondary cancers

Bisphosphonates

There are two different types of cells found in bone -- osteoclasts and osteoblasts. Osteoclasts destroy the old bone and osteoblasts deposit new minerals and build new bone. Cancer cells that have spread to the bone produce chemicals that influence the activity of these cells, upsetting the normal balance. This commonly causes small holes in the bone due to overactivity of the osteoclasts.

Bisphosphonates are drugs that restrict the action of the osteoclasts (the cells that destroy bone). They are not a treatment for the cancer itself but may help to reduce the breakdown of the bone and so reduce the risk of fracture and discomfort. Increasingly, doctors are recommending the long-term use of bisphosphonates as a way of treating bone pain, preventing broken bones and reducing the need for radiotherapy treatment. Bisphosphonates are also commonly used to treat high blood calcium levels (see [treating hypercalcaemia](#)).

Bisphosphonates may be given into a vein (intravenously) in the outpatient department or, where facilities allow, in the patient's own home or at their GP's surgery, every 4-6 weeks. Some bisphosphonates can be taken by mouth as tablets but these must be taken on an empty stomach an hour before food.

Next page >>